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Snowden, Philip Snowden

An Imperial Zollverein?

London

1903

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By PHILIP SNOWDEN.

The Government are to ask the opinion of the country on the question of Free Trade within the Empire, with Protection against the foreigner. It is important, therefore, that the subject should be ventilated, and clear and intelligent opinions formed upon it.

The question must be considered apart from sentiment. It is a business matter, and it must be considered on the hard facts of the case. It is a matter which would affect the United Kingdom to an enormously greater extent than the rest of the empire. In a short article the subject cannot be treated with any elaboration nor figures given to support conclusions. I want, however, to summarise a few results which would follow the adoption of this scheme.

We are, as a legacy of the mistaken commercial policy of the last hundred years, a nation of manufacturers. Our raw materials, except coal and iron, are imported. The exportation of these resources, coal and iron, is draining the country of its natural wealth, and must eventually lead to national impoverishment. Raw material and food we have to import. We have millions of our population, under present conditions, dependent for a living on the maintenance of our export trade of manufactured goods. Any loss of the foreign trade will cause widespread distress. That trade must be maintained, and, if possible, increased, until we have firmly established a more natural industrial state.

Granting that our foreign trade must for some time be maintained, if possible, the contention of the Free Traders that cheap raw material and cheap living are necessary, is sound. Mr Chamberlain's proposal, if carried into effect, would considerably increase the cost of both. It was admitted that taxation of food would be necessary. We import £200,000,000 worth of food annually. A 10 per cent. tax on this would cost a shilling a week on the average to every family of five persons. At present nearly one-half of the working-class population are not able to get sufficient food to make them efficient. A tax on food would reduce the physical condition of the workers still further, and lessen their efficiency as workers. This lessened efficiency would increase the cost of production. A tax on imports,

it should be remembered, takes out of the pockets of the consumer much more than it brings into the Exchequer of the State.

A tax on raw material, it was said in Parliament, might not be necessary. But such a tax will be necessary. The only article we get from the colonies to a greater extent than from foreign countries is wool. Australia and Cape Colony will want protecting against the competition of South America. No scheme of the kind suggested would be accepted if it did not tax wool, the staple trade of Australia and South Africa. If Canada's exports of corn are to be protected against the United States and Russia, the wool trade of the other colonies must be protected in the same way. A tax on South American wool will raise the price of Colonial and English wool to a figure which will destroy our export of woollen goods, throw tens of thousands out of employment, and increase the price of clothing to all.

Cotton it may not be necessary to tax, because we get practically no raw cotton from within the Empire. But a tax on American corn, and a tax on American imports into our colonies will cause reprisals. America is not much concerned about exporting its raw cotton. It is working up a cotton manufacturing trade which will soon be so large as to take all the raw cotton grown in the States. But as an act of reciprocity the United States would no doubt put an export duty on raw cotton, and this would raise the price of the material to a figure which would make it impossible for a Lancashire cotton factory to compete in the world's market. This is what Mr. Chamberlain's proposal has in store for Lancashire.

The increase of trade with our colonies which would be likely to follow would be comparatively small. Free Trade is already the system applied to two-thirds of the trade within the British Empire. With the three hundred millions of India, with Hong Kong (for China), with West Africa, with the East Indies, we have practically Free Trade at present. It is our own people who protect themselves against our trade. Canada for six years has given us preferential rates. Here we may see the probable effect of the Zollverein in increasing our colonial trade. Preferential rates for British goods entering Canada have had the effect during the last six years of increasing our imports into that country by 30 per cent. But in the same period, in spite of heavier duties, the United States has increased its exports to Canada by 100 per cent., and France by an equal percentage! Total Free Trade with our Empire would effect our trade to the extent of £38,000,000 a year only. For this we should have to sacrifice three-quarters of our present export trade which is done with foreign countries.

The effect then of the Zollverein would be to dislocate our present trade without substituting another; to enormously increase unemployment; to increase the cost of living; to embitter our international relations; and it would not benefit our colonies to any material extent.

The idea of the Manchester School that we should devote ourselves to building up a foreign trade, that England should be the workshop of the world, was a mistake. The tendency all over the world is for manufactures to settle down where the raw material is grown. Each country must devote itself to developing its natural resources.

This is the new policy we must adopt. We want Protection against landlordism, capitalism, and the giant monopolies which are draining the life's blood of the nation. We want to turn our attention to the land, to make that the basis of our national industry. When we produce our own food, then our people are guaranteed against starvation, after that we can devote our surplus population and our surplus energies to manufactures. This is the alternative we propose to Mr. Chamberlain's latest red-herring.—Reprinted from the *I.L.P. News*.

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